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Europeanizing the Party Politics of Minority-Kin-State Relations: Evidence from Northern Ireland and South Tyrol

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This article explores how kin-minority parties have changed their territorial positions as a result of European integration. Kin-minority parties aim to represent a national minority that they consider to be part of a larger nation that constitutes the majority in a neighboring kin-state. The analysis is carried out through a comparison of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) in Northern Ireland and the South Tyrolean People's Party (SVP) in South Tyrol. The article finds that both parties endorse Europeanized, functional cooperation with their respective kin-states. This supersedes irredentism and other ethnically inspired territorial claims. Kin-minority parties maintain this position despite possible spill-backs of European integration.

INTRODUCTION

Scholarship on regionalist and minority nationalist parties in Europe has shown that stateless nations tend to link their pursuit of independence, autonomy or devolution to developments at the European level. While some authors hold that minority nationalist parties' support for a vaguely-defined "Europe of the Regions" has waxed and waned,¹ others find that European integration serves as a facilitator for secessionist claims.² These accounts, however, tend to disregard political parties that represent national minorities that associate with neighboring kin-states.³ The aim of this article is to analyze how parties that claim to represent kin-minorities adapt their territorial goals to the opportunities and constraints that emerge as a result of European integration. In particular, I am interested in how kin-minority parties adjust their demands for autonomy or devolution to a Europeanized environment, and how they aim at political rapprochement with "their" kin-state in light of European developments. I hypothesize

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that Europeanization, understood as the impact of European integration on domestic politics,⁴ delegitimizes ethnically inspired claims for changes in territorial government. In particular, it makes irredentism – the demand to integrate the territory inhabited by a minority into its kin-state – unfeasible. Instead, I expect that European integration provides incentives for kin-minority parties to demand territorial autonomy within their host-states, and to seek functional cross-border cooperation with their kin-states.

I examine these propositions through the analysis of two Western European kin-minority parties: the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) in Northern Ireland and the South Tyrolean People's Party (Südtiroler Volkspartei, SVP) in South Tyrol. Until the early 2000s, the SDLP was the biggest party within the Irish nationalist community in Northern Ireland. Since its foundation in 1970, the SDLP has insisted on the importance of the “Irish dimension” for the resolution of the political conflict in Northern Ireland, which to date remains part of the United Kingdom (UK). The SVP has been the biggest party in the predominantly German-speaking province of South Tyrol, Italy, since 1948. The party's efforts to achieve far-reaching autonomy for the province have continuously been supported by South Tyrol's kin-state, Austria.

This article finds that European integration has led to a partial convergence of kin-minority parties' territorial positions around functionally driven minority-state relations. For the SDLP, European integration provides a template for the reconfiguration of the relationships within Northern Ireland's society, between the two parts of Ireland, and between Ireland and Great Britain. The SVP, in contrast, uses European integration to justify its calls for the expansion of South Tyrol's autonomy within Italy. Europe-inspired forms of cooperation between South Tyrol and Austria have gained in importance, especially at the regional level. Yet they play a subordinate role to the SVP's autonomy agenda. The SDLP and the SVP continue to hold on

to their Europeanized territorial positions even in light of recent crises in European integration, such as the UK's decision to leave the European Union (EU), or the rise of Eurosceptic parties throughout Europe.

The next section of the article presents a framework of analysis for the Europeanization of kin-minority parties. This is followed by an in-depth analysis of the two case studies. The final section summarizes the results of the cross-case comparison and presents some concluding remarks.

THE EUROPEANIZATION OF KIN-MINORITIES: TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

Kin-minority parties are a sub-category of a larger party family that has emerged as a result of peripheral opposition to the formation of modern states in Europe.⁵ Numerous labels have been used to characterize the overarching group of parties, including regionalist, ethno-regionalist, minority nationalist, and non-state-wide.⁶ In order to mobilize against state-building projects, these parties “synthesize the various elements of identity and channel diffuse territorial sentiments into [...] specific political programmes.”⁷ This can translate into calls for autonomy, federalism or secession from the host-state.⁸

Kin-minority parties share these characteristics of the wider party family. Yet, they feature one additional particularity. They consider the peripheral group that they claim to speak for (the minority) to be part of a larger nation that constitutes the majority in a neighboring state (the kin-state). Hence, kin-minority parties identify with the state- and nation-building projects of their co-nationals abroad. At the same time, they oppose the integration of the minority into the state in which the minority resides (the host-state). Brubaker describes the relationship between host-states, kin-minorities and kin-states as a discursively produced “triadic nexus.”⁹ Following this interpretation, the links between the kin-minority and the kin-state are not

predetermined. Yet they are frequently stable, social phenomena that influence individuals' perceptions, values, norms and actions.¹⁰

The impact of European integration on the relationship between minorities, kin-states and host-states has been conceptualized as a significant reconfiguration of the triadic nexus.¹¹ Kin-minority parties are likely to adapt to these modified context conditions. One way in which such an adaptation can take place is through a change in programmatic positions.¹² This article explores how kin-minority parties change their territorial positions as a result of European integration. This means that I explore the Europeanization of the demands that kin-minority parties voice *vis-à-vis* their host-states and *vis-à-vis* their kin-states. The main hypothesis is that European integration constrains ethnically-inspired claims for changes in territorial government. In particular, it makes irredentist aspirations unfeasible. Instead, I expect that European integration provides incentives for kin-minority parties to demand territorial autonomy within their host-states, and to seek closer functional cooperation with their kin-states. As summarized in Figure 1, I conceptualize that the Europeanization of kin-minority parties' territorial positions unfolds over three ideal-typical phases of European integration.¹³

[Figure 1 around here]

The initial phase of European integration, from the Treaty of Rome in 1957 to the 1986 Single European Act (SEA), mainly affected the relationship between host-states and kin-states. Hence, I label it the period of interstate integration. Both major attempts to explain European integration in this period, neofunctionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism,¹⁴ assume that sub-state actors initially played a negligible role for integration. Thus, I argue that kin-minority parties will adjust their territorial positions in reaction to Europeanized interstate relations. Most importantly, kin-minority parties are expected to adopt to the growing recognition of European state borders, and the subsequent “de-securitization” of borders.¹⁵ Given that most

kin-states in Europe abandoned irredentist claims as a result of interstate integration,¹⁶ I expect kin-minority parties to equally refrain from irredentist demands. Instead, I presume that kin-minority parties experience “adaptational pressures”¹⁷ to use emerging forms of cooperation between kin-states and host-states to pursue their territorial goals within the host-state.

The intensification of European integration following the SEA and the 1992 Treaty of Maastricht provided additional incentives for kin-minority parties to adjust to new European context conditions. The creation of the Economic and Monetary Union and the Common Market facilitated transnational economic activities.¹⁸ In addition, the EU provided particular economic incentives for cross-border cooperation as part of its Interreg program.¹⁹ Integration in the economic realm was accompanied by institutional innovations, such as the abolition of border controls in the Schengen zone, the creation of the Committee of the Regions, or the possibility for regional ministers to participate in EU Council meetings.²⁰ Many minority nationalists interpreted these developments as a transfer of essential state functions to the supranational level, and argued that this would facilitate their territory’s emancipation from the host-state.²¹ The intensification of European integration thus helped minority nationalists to justify their territorial goals in functional, rather than in ethnic terms. The resulting aspirations for the reconfiguration of territorial boundaries along functional lines found their focal point in often ill-defined, yet politically prominent concepts like the “Europe of the Regions,”²² or “post-nationalism.”²³ While the former concept tends to refer to sub-state empowerment that falls short of secession or irredentism, the latter challenges the contemporary significance of statehood and nationality all together. In other words, these concepts transformed political struggles on the traditional center-periphery cleavage from a zero-sum game into a dispute over the very significance of sovereignty and territory.²⁴ Against this backdrop, I expect kin-minority parties to apply new concepts of territoriality and sovereignty to seek emancipation from the host-state, and to embrace functional forms of cross-border cooperation to strengthen

their links with the kin-state.

In recent years, European integration has been curbed by multiple crises. The 2008 financial crisis, EU-internal rows over immigration, and the UK's withdrawal from the EU exemplify this development. Zoe Lefkofridi and Philippe Schmitter hold that this crisis-proneness might either lead to a deepening (spill-over), or a retraction (spill-back) of European integration. Alternatively, the integration process might also remain in stasis.²⁵ The extent to which recent crises lead to spill-backs or perpetuated alleged stasis is open to debate.²⁶ Eve Hepburn and Anwen Elias argue that European integration has not sufficiently developed in the direction that many supporters of a "Europe of the Regions" had hoped for in the 1990s. They find that several minority nationalist parties reverted to absolute interpretations of sovereignty and statehood.²⁷ Yet these analyses do not consider the role that cross-border cooperation has played for the territorial outlook of kin-minority parties. If kin-minority parties' interpretation of recent European developments was one of stasis or spill-back, then the expectation would be that they too renounce their support for functional redefinition of territorial government. However, if kin-minority parties continue to acknowledge the potential of functionally driven territorial reconfiguration, then they are likely to uphold de-ethnized territorial goals *vis-à-vis* their host-state and their kin-state.

These Europe-induced changes *grosso modo* suggest convergence between kin-minority parties' territorial positions around functionally driven emancipation from the host-state, and rapprochement with the kin-state. Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks find, however, that European integration itself has been increasingly contested by competing parties since the intensification phase.²⁸ They hold that parties with inclusive concepts of identity are more likely to be pro-European, which makes them susceptible to Europeanization. Conversely, parties that support exclusive ethnic identities tend to be skeptical of the integration process,

and are likely to be reluctant to Europeanize their territorial positions. Paul Mitchell and colleagues show that kin-minority parties are most successful in electoral contests if they combine inclusive positions on some issues, with exclusive ethnic positions on others.²⁹ Competition between kin-minority parties will thus incentivize them to seek a distinctive mix of inclusive, potentially Europeanized positions, and of ethnically inspired positions that are resilient to Europeanization. In other words, I expect party competition to be a “mediating variable”³⁰ that yields different trajectories of Europeanization for different kin-minority parties.

I evaluate these propositions by analyzing the Europeanization of the SDLP’s and the SVP’s territorial positions between 1970 and 2019. This long-term perspective allows me to trace these parties’ respective developments from the initial stages of European integration to the most recent developments in the Brexit process and the integration of Eurosceptic parties into the Italian and Austrian governments. The investigation is based on a qualitative content analysis of party documents, parliamentary debates, and semi-structured interviews that I have carried out between May and December 2018. The presented interview data has been anonymized. The comparison between the SDLP and the SVP follows a most-similar system design,³¹ in that it compares two western European parties that have pursued minority nationalist policies in a committedly non-violent way. Both parties can be located around the center of the left-right divide, the SDLP being a member of the Party of European Socialists, and the SVP a member of the European People’s Party. Northern Ireland and South Tyrol both operate on a system of corporative power-sharing at the regional level. In addition, the party systems in the two regions are segmented along ethnic lines. However, the two parties differ significantly in how the borders between their respective host-state and kin-state have been managed. While Ireland officially contested the Irish border until 1998, disputes over the Austrian-Italian border were settled in 1946. Ireland and the UK have both been EU members

since 1973 whereas the border between Austria and Italy was an external EU border until 1995.

EUROPE AS A STRATEGY FOR PEACE OR UNIFICATION? THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC AND LABOUR PARTY

The SDLP emerged from the Civil Rights Movement that had challenged the discrimination of Northern Ireland's Catholic/Irish nationalist population in the late 1960s. After its foundation in 1970, the party quickly absorbed most of those sectors of Northern Irish politics that rejected unionist domination of the region, but who remained committed to peaceful means to pursue their political goals. The SDLP held onto this position even when political violence escalated into the so-called Troubles that led to a suspension of Northern Ireland's regional government, and the introduction of direct rule from Westminster in 1972. The SDLP played a key role in the negotiation of the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement (GFA) that brought large-scale political violence in the region to an end and led to the revocation of the Republic's constitutionally enshrined irredentism. Until the early 2000s, the SDLP was the largest party within Northern Ireland's nationalist community. Since then, it has been repeatedly overtaken by its more radical challenger, Sinn Féin.³²

Interstate Integration

Interstate integration between the UK and the Republic of Ireland intensified after both countries joined the European Communities in 1973. At that time, political violence in Northern Ireland was at its height, and devolved government failed on two occasions in 1972 and 1974.³³ Since its foundation, the SDLP has held that cooperation between the UK and the Irish governments was fundamental to a solution of the Northern Ireland conflict. Support for interstate integration, however, did not trump the SDLP's irredentist positions *tout court*.

The SDLP first gave a detailed outline of its territorial positions in 1973. The party demanded a united Ireland in the long run and suggested shared British-Irish sovereignty over Northern

Ireland as an interim solution.³⁴ European integration, according to the SDLP, would serve as a template for future political developments in the region:

Finally, we are now in the second half of the twentieth century, at a time when the whole of Europe is looking to the future with a vision to end the old quarrels [...] We in this Island cannot remain in the seventeenth century. We cannot participate in this vision while at the same time continuing our outdated quarrel.³⁵

The way in which Europe was imagined to influence domestic politics still remained unclear in the early 1970s. This changed at the end of the decade, when the more pro-European faction within the SDLP took over its leadership. An article published by the new party leader, John Hume, in 1979 alludes to three fields in which European integration could facilitate political solutions in Northern Ireland. Firstly, he claimed that European integration could serve as an ideational inspiration for achieving a peaceful society that reconciles different political affiliations and identities. Secondly, he held that participation in European fora had set Ireland on an equal footing with the UK in international affairs. This helped overcome the post-colonial character of bilateral relations and could eventually spark collaboration between the two parts of the island. Thirdly, European institutions like the European Parliament (EP), or the European Court of Human Rights could serve as a stage at which the politics of Northern Ireland would be addressed on an international level. This would contribute to tackling the political gridlock in the region.³⁶ Hume's article marked a shift in the SDLP's policy priorities. The party held on to irredentism as a long-term aspiration. Yet it began to focus on how political violence in the region could be stopped. The amelioration of the bilateral relations between the kin-state and the host-state in a European context was considered to be a crucial first step in this process. The SDLP adopted these positions in a context where electoral competition within Northern Ireland's minority community was minimal. Until the 1980s, other kin-minority parties abstained from contesting elections in the region.³⁷

From the late 1970s onwards, the SDLP proactively promoted its territorial positions within European fora, especially after Hume was elected to the EP in 1979. Consequently, the EP approved the so-called Haagerup Report in 1984. The Report followed Hume's arguments, *inter alia*, in that it described the conflict in Northern Ireland as one between different national aspirations, and suggested "the establishment of joint British-Irish responsibilities" as one possible tool for conflict resolution.³⁸ This call for bilateral cooperation materialized in the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, in which the UK government conceded considerable influence over the governance of Northern Ireland to the Irish government.³⁹

Initial Europeanization contributed to a shift in the SDLP's short-term territorial goals from irredentism to conflict resolution through interstate cooperation. European institutions helped promote this position, which culminated in a shared approach to Northern Ireland between the host-state and the kin-state after 1985. Contrary to expectations, Europeanization did not cause the SDLP to abandon irredentism as a long-term aspiration.

Intensification of Integration

The intensification of European integration allowed the SDLP to link neofunctionalist ideas to its increasingly sophisticated position on conflict resolution. The party hoped that the relationships between the kin-minority, the host-state and the kin-state would follow a pattern of cooperation in the context of an increasingly interdependent Europe. However, neofunctionalism did not supersede the SDLP's irredentism entirely. The resulting ambiguities have worked to the detriment of the SDLP's electoral performance.

For the SDLP, the "Europe of the Regions" predominantly meant that it hoped for increased structural funds for Northern Ireland in the post-Maastricht EU.⁴⁰ Unlike other minority nationalists, the SDLP was only moderately enthusiastic about a potential expansion of sub-state political competences.⁴¹ After all, devolution without sufficient minority protection would

have reverted Northern Ireland to the *status quo ante* of unionist domination. Instead, from the mid-1980s onwards, the SDLP aimed at a reconfiguration of three sets of relationships. Firstly, the party sought to establish power-sharing arrangements between nationalists and unionists within a system of devolved government in Northern Ireland. Secondly, the SDLP aimed at the improvement of the relationships between the North and the Republic of Ireland through institutionalized structures. And lastly, it demanded an institutionalized forum in which the relationships between Ireland and Great Britain could be enhanced.⁴²

This approach also drew on a systematic connection between Northern Irish politics and European integration. More specifically, the party applied its neofunctionalist interpretation of the integration process to its position on domestic politics. The idea was that once limited functional cooperation along each of the three dimensions was established, this cooperation would inevitably expand and ultimately lead to overall reconciliation between the people of the two islands. In Hume's words:

[Changes to UK-Ireland relations are] happening in a context where [...] borders including the Irish one will be no more than county boundaries and where the common economic ground between both parts is increasing daily and will be virtually identical in the Single Europe [...] By working the common ground [...] we will evolve into a completely new Ireland born of agreement.⁴³

The SDLP spelled out its Europeanized positions in closer detail in the peace talks during the 1990s. On one occasion, the party even suggested that Northern Ireland should be governed by a six-member Executive Commission that would include one member nominated by the European Union itself. Such ideas were ruled out by other parties in the talks. Yet the SDLP's Europeanized positions did have a significant impact on the 1998 GFA. Most importantly, the GFA was built around the three sets of relationships envisaged by Hume (the GFA's three "strands"). Moreover, the GFA's North-South dimension was institutionalized through the so-called North-South Ministerial Council (NSMC). The formats in which the NSMC meets, in

plenary and in sectoral formations, is modelled after the workings of the EU Council. It is designed to facilitate cooperation between the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland on matters of mutual interest; and, for instance, operates a Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) to manage EU funding on both sides of the Irish border. The distribution of offices in Northern Ireland's power-sharing executive also follows a European example: The method of d'Hondt, used to translate the number of seats in the Northern Ireland Assembly into executive offices, is also used to select EP committee members.⁴⁴

The SDLP's expectations in relation to these newly established structures, however, remained ambiguous. On the one hand, it expected institutions like the NSMC to help overcome divisions between jurisdictions and communities by establishing a "post-national" rationale of cooperation. On the other hand, it portrayed North-South cooperation as a stepping stone towards Irish unity.⁴⁵ Statements like "the nation state is no longer a sufficient political entity to democratically confront the [...] issues which confront us"⁴⁶ have existed alongside assertions such as "[w]e will transform the economic and social face of our country. And when I say our country I don't just mean Northern Ireland, I mean our country, Ireland."⁴⁷ This ambiguity, among other things, made the SDLP vulnerable to the electoral challenge posed by Sinn Féin.⁴⁸ After the GFA, Sinn Féin promoted peaceful, yet exclusive positions on identity politics, combined with pragmatic positions on issues such as functional cooperation within a cross-border "island economy."⁴⁹ Sinn Féin denounced the SDLP of "the folly of their post nationalist position."⁵⁰ After 1998, these assertive ethnoterritorial positions were more in tune with public opinion among the kin-minority than the SDLP's ambiguous expectations of the GFA's structures.⁵¹ Since 2001, Sinn Féin has emerged as the largest kin-minority party. The significant influence of the SDLP's Europeanized territorial positions on the GFA notwithstanding, the party's electoral defeats have largely diminished its role in Northern Ireland politics from the early 2000s onwards.

The intensification of European integration helped the SDLP to campaign for a neofunctionalist reconfiguration of the relationships between jurisdictions and communities in Ireland and Great Britain. This approach materialized to a significant extent in the 1998 GFA. The SDLP remained ambiguous about the desired outcome of its neofunctionalist position. Aspirations for “post-nationalism” coexisted with long-term irredentist objectives. This ambiguity has disadvantaged the SDLP in electoral competitions with Sinn Féin. Consecutive electoral defeats have since diminished the SDLP’s impact on Northern Ireland politics post-1998.

Crisis-prone Integration

Following the GFA, large-scale political violence in Northern Ireland abated. Despite numerous suspensions of the devolved institutions, the period between 2007 and 2017 saw an extended period of political cooperation between the communities in the region. EU institutions have financially supported the peace process, aiming to contribute to the “promotion of dialogue and trust between the EU and political and civil representatives in Northern Ireland.”⁵² The UK’s decision to leave the EU constitutes a major spill-back to European integration. In spite of this crisis, the SDLP continues to support functional cooperation between the minority, the host-state, and particularly the kin-state. Ultimately, it wants to secure Northern Ireland’s EU membership through political integration into the kin-state.

In the run-up to the 2016 referendum on the UK’s EU membership, the SDLP supported it to remain in the EU, and campaigned predominantly on economic arguments.⁵³ This may be surprising for a party with a long record of linking European integration to political stability and peace. One former SDLP leader justified the focus of the campaign with the following rationale: “If I had said that the referendum, if we lost it, means that there’s border posts, how do I then argue against that afterwards? So I wouldn’t do that.”⁵⁴

In June 2016, 52% of voters in the UK as a whole voted to leave the EU. In Northern Ireland,

however, 56% voted to remain. In light of these results, the SDLP demands a “special status” for Northern Ireland that allows the region to stay in the European Economic Area, and that safeguards individual rights derived from EU membership, regardless of Great Britain’s future relationship with the EU.⁵⁵ In order to address concerns about potential divergence of regulatory standards between Northern Ireland and the EU, the party suggests that “Strand Two of the [Good Friday] Agreement can and must be used to enable North South parity and equivalence and allow us an all island single market for specific sectors.”⁵⁶ Thus, the SDLP does not only argue that the GFA must be protected from the potentially negative implications of Brexit (for example possible border controls between the North and South), but suggests that the GFA can be used as a solution to mitigate these implications. By the same token, the party demands closer coordination between Northern Ireland and the kin-state on European issues, and calls for continued representation of the North in EU institutions through all-island delegations. Ultimately, the SDLP hopes that Northern Ireland will re-join the EU through unification with the Republic of Ireland, which – according to the GFA’s provisions – would require a majority in referendums in both parts of the island.

This position needs to be read against the backdrop of three caveats. Firstly, the working of the GFA’s functional logic has been far from perfect. Northern Ireland’s power-sharing institutions have been suspended on several occasions, most recently since 2017. Cross-border institutions have also kept a low profile since their creation. One SDLP member even admitted that “I can’t remember that there has been any meaningful initiative that has emerged from the NSMC.”⁵⁷ The SDLP’s public assertions of the NSMC’s post-Brexit significance seem to do little justice to the challenges that might emerge once the UK has left the EU. Secondly, the SDLP’s weak electoral performance in recent years has further decreased the party’s leverage on policy outcomes. Following the 2017 general election, and the suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly, the party is only represented at the local level. In these adverse conditions, the SDLP

tries to voice its territorial positions through closer cooperation with the largest opposition party in the Republic,⁵⁸ and with other pro-EU parties in Northern Ireland.⁵⁹ However, as the SDLP's inability to capitalize on pro-EU votes in the 2019 European elections suggests, this strategy has not translated into greater electoral competitiveness.⁶⁰ Thirdly, the provisions for post-Brexit Northern Ireland that have been agreed by the UK government and the EU Commission in November 2018 (the "backstop") have not received a majority in the UK Parliament by the time of writing (July 2019). Although the SDLP supports the "backstop,"⁶¹ Northern Ireland's pro-EU parties have had no means to influence the UK-internal debate on the region's future relationship with the EU.

In light of a major spill-back of European integration such as Brexit, the SDLP still adheres to its support for functional cooperation with the kin-state. It even considers this cooperation to remedy the difficulties that emerge from spill-back. Irredentism is considered to be a last resort to resist the drawbacks of disintegration. The practicality of the SDLP's proposals is, however, severely constrained by the suspension of the devolved institutions, the party's electoral decline and diminished policy impact, and the increasing alienation between host-state decision-makers and Northern Ireland's pro-EU parties.

FROM ETHNIC NATIONALISM TO THE EUROPEAN REGION OF TYROL: THE SÜDTIROLER VOLKSPARTEI

The SVP was founded in 1945 to represent the German-speaking community in the Italian province of South Tyrol/Alto Adige. Almost 70% of the provincial population claim to speak German as their first language, while 26% declare to be Italian-speakers, and 4% speak Ladin, a Rhaeto-Romance language.⁶² Since the late 1940s, the SVP's core demand has been autonomy for South Tyrol within Italy. At the same time, it has tried to strengthen South Tyrol's ties with the rest of the German-speaking world. The SVP has been the dominant political party

within the Germanophone and Ladin communities and maintained an absolute majority at the provincial level until 2008.⁶³ Thanks to this dominant position, the SVP could establish itself as a key architect of South Tyrol's "Second Statute of Autonomy" (ASt). The ASt combines territorial self-government and complex sets of group rights for the three local language groups.⁶⁴ Despite increasing electoral competition over the last three decades, the SVP has dominated all power-sharing coalitions at the provincial level since 1948.

Interstate Integration

The SVP renounced its initial demands for self-determination for the South Tyrolean people a few months after the party's foundation in 1945. This shift followed the revocation of Austria's irredentist claims, and Italy's assurance to "safeguard [...] the German-speaking element"⁶⁵ of South Tyrol as part of a bilateral agreement in 1946. Since then, autonomy for South Tyrol has been the SVP's core territorial position.⁶⁶ This early change in the SVP's territorial demands was not a result of European integration. However, it reflected the acceptance of a consolidating European post-war order, in which cooperative interstate relations would become the norm.⁶⁷ In the period of interstate integration, the SVP utilized this European order to mitigate its ethnic nationalist positions.

Italy's initial implementation of South Tyrol's autonomy (the "First" ASt of 1948) turned out to be an ineffective tool for minority protection. Mass protests and sporadic political violence plagued South Tyrol in the late 1950s and 1960s. A much more encompassing "Second" ASt entered into force in 1972, following prolonged negotiations between the Italian and the Austrian governments, and the SVP. The 1972 ASt, *inter alia*, grants far-reaching competences to the province of South Tyrol, and cultural autonomy to the three local language groups (for example separately organized education systems to ensure mother tongue education). From the immediate post-war period until the late 1980s, the SVP obtained close to 60% of the vote in

regional elections. The SVP thus held a quasi-monopoly regarding the representation of the kin-minority, and party competition within the minority was almost negligible.⁶⁸

The SVP updated its programmatic positions in the new institutional context of the 1972 ASt. The implementation of the ASt, and related by-laws, remained the SVP's core territorial position. Moreover, the SVP began to link this position to wider European developments.⁶⁹ Its 1972 party program included a section titled "For a United Europe." The party pledged to "support all efforts that lead the European Community (EC) from economic to political integration," called for a "European law of ethnic groups, in order to solve the questions of ethnic minorities," and to "overcome nationalism."⁷⁰ In a similarly vague fashion, the SVP envisaged the creation of a "Region of the Alps" to be an essential component of European integration. At that stage, neither the potential functions nor the geographical scope of this alpine regionalist project were clearly specified. The only visible expression of these efforts was an agreement for rather limited cooperation between various sub-state territories in Italy, Switzerland, Austria and Germany signed in 1972.⁷¹ It is nevertheless remarkable that the concept is embedded in an allegedly post-nationalist rhetoric that conceives the "Region of the Alps" not as an ethnic entity but as part of a broader effort to "hone occidental cultural values in freedom and peace."⁷²

This stands in stark contrast to the ethnically inspired parts of the SVP's 1972 program. The document does not refer to South Tyrol's link to Austria at all. Rather, it portrays the region's "spiritual and cultural bonds with the entire Land of Tyrol" as part of a wider cultural affinity with the whole German-speaking area of Europe. In addition, these concepts are embedded in a section of the party program titled "The nucleus of society," which starts out by highlighting the importance of the traditional family's role within society.⁷³

The SVP's territorial position during interstate integration reflected a markedly ethnic

understanding of identity. Political alliances with the South Tyroleans' co-nationals abroad were depicted as part of a pan-Germanic relationship, rather than as a functional alliance with their geographical neighbors. However, this official position contradicts the party's constructive role in the negotiations that led to the 1972 ASt. In this process, the party supported bilateral cooperation between the kin-state and the host-state to ensure maximum autonomy for South Tyrol. These negotiations took place outside European channels. Similarly, the SVP's rejection of irredentism followed a new geopolitical logic that was not owed to European integration *per se*. Nevertheless, the party's incipient Europeanization is reflected in its explicit support for European integration and its vaguely expressed endorsement of de-ethnicized cooperation at the regional level.

Intensification of Integration

In the late 1980s, South Tyrol and its governing party were confronted with a threefold change. Firstly, the ASt and related provisions were close to be fully implemented; secondly, Austria was aiming to join the European Community; and thirdly, the SVP's agenda was increasingly challenged by secessionist parties. As a result of these changes, the SVP largely de-ethnicized its territorial positions.

In 1992, the Austrian government declared to the United Nations, with the SVP's consent, that Italy had fully implemented all internationally agreed provisions for the protection of the South Tyrolean minority. This "declaration of dispute settlement" was a precondition for Austria's EC accession.⁷⁴ Thereafter, the SVP replaced its somewhat technical rhetoric on minority rights with more eye-catching calls for a "dynamic autonomy."⁷⁵ This meant that the gradual expansion of South Tyrol's autonomous competences should be continued beyond the original ASt.

The SVP's 1993 party program also reinforced the party's pro-European position and held that

“the entire Tyrol must constitute an essential building block of a future united Europe.”⁷⁶ The future Europe that the SVP envisioned was supposed to be a “Europe without borders, in which regional particularities are fully acknowledged.” According to the SVP, the best way to achieve this was through a “Europe of the Regions,” of which a “multilingual, federal European Region of Tyrol” should be an integral part. The party thus built upon its previous ideas of a “Region of the Alps” and made a bigger effort to outline what this should entail. In particular, the SVP did no longer shy away from being explicit about the multilingual character of this would-be entity, and endorsed the participation of the neighboring, Italian-dominated province of Trento in its regionalist efforts. However, the SVP was still eager to ensure that the German-speaking community would constitute the majority within a future “European Region.”⁷⁷ The most tangible expression of the revisited “European Region” was perhaps the inauguration of a common office in Brussels by the provinces of Trento and South Tyrol, and the Austrian Land of Tyrol. In spite of the Italian authorities’ initial suspicions about the secessionist potential of this entity, the SVP was eager to highlight its functional character as a tool for pursuing the regions utilitarian interests *vis-à-vis* the kin-state, the host-state and the EU. According to the then South Tyrolean First Minister, Luis Durnwalder:

All three countries – the Land of Tyrol, South Tyrol and the Trentino – are threatened by state centralism and enforced conformity [...]. The future European Region of Tyrol should not only be a protective cloak [...] but should become the political frame for the common will of the three countries and their inhabitants, to give them a voice in Rome, in Vienna, and especially in Brussels.⁷⁸

Moreover, the SVP substantially redefined its vision of South Tyrol’s links with the kin-state. The SVP praised the region’s ties with Austria and called for an intensification of cooperation between the two territories, “especially against the backdrop of Austria’s EC accession.” These claims replaced much of the SVP’s former allegiance to the wider Germanophone cultural space. While this rapprochement with Austria was a clear down-scaling of the SVP’s previous

pan-Germanic outlook, the party's commitment to "South Tyrol's fatherland Austria," was not exclusively built on functional or civic considerations. By 1993, the party still considered "Austria's permanent support" to be indispensable for the "continued existence of the German and Ladin ethnic groups" within the Italian state.⁷⁹ However, following the introduction of the Euro and the launch of the Schengen Zone, functional arguments increasingly superseded the remnants of ethnic nationalist ideology. This shift is illustrated by the following quote:

For our country [...] the common currency will also have a noticeable political effect. The dismantling of borders towards the North becomes even more definite [...]. What separates us will cease to exist, and will be replaced by the common awareness that the Europe without Borders has become reality.⁸⁰

Europeanization thus helped the SVP to combine its track record of achieving the ethnically inspired ASt with a functionally driven perspective of expanding the province's self-government in the future. This made the party largely resilient to more radical electoral challengers. On several occasions during the 1990s and 2000s, secessionist forces obtained unexpected electoral support from the South Tyrolean minority. Yet the SVP has, by far, remained the largest kin-minority party in the province. This has given the SVP almost unrestricted leverage over provincial public policies.⁸¹

In short, Austria's EC accession at a time of intensifying European integration allowed the SVP to promote tighter functional links between the minority and the kin-state at the expense of previous ethnoterritorial demands. The SVP promoted functional cross-border cooperation at the regional level as part of the "European Region of Tyrol." Compared to the SVP's calls for further emancipation from the host-state, these ideas remained rather underdeveloped. The SVP strongly supported the continuation of the process of devolution that had begun in 1972. As a predominant party in the province, the SVP could use most of the newly devolved competences at its discretion.

Crisis-prone Integration

Throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, the SVP managed to obtain additional competences from its host-state. Among other things, Italy's 2001 constitutional reform strengthened South Tyrol's autonomy within the country's legal framework.⁸² Moreover, various bilateral agreements between the province and the state have secured highly beneficial funding arrangements for South Tyrol.⁸³ However, the rise of Eurosceptic parties in the host-state and the kin-state have incentivized the SVP to take more pragmatic territorial positions.

The SVP lost its absolute majority in votes in the 2008 provincial elections. The main beneficiary of this development was the German-speaking secessionist opposition. Against this backdrop, the SVP changed its core territorial demand from "dynamic autonomy" to "comprehensive autonomy," demanding "maximum self-government for South Tyrol and the inclusion of our land into an all-European development."⁸⁴ Through this shift, the SVP explicitly linked its territorial ambitions within the host-state to its continued pro-European positions. This strategy became even more pronounced during its 2018 electoral campaign, when the SVP demarcated itself decisively from the newly elected central government's Euroscepticism. The following quote from that year's election manifesto is indicative for this stance:

Also in Italy, exit from the European Union or the Schengen Area do no longer seem to be off the table. We will take all conceivable steps to demarcate ourselves from such tendencies; if necessary, also through independence vis-à-vis state initiatives.⁸⁵

In light of the central government's half-hearted commitment to the Monetary Union, one former SVP senator even pointed out that "if [the government] took the Euro away from us, it would almost be the same as with Northern Ireland that is pushed out of the EU against its will."⁸⁶ However, after prolonged negotiations, the SVP eventually entered into a power-sharing coalition with the Eurosceptic Lega at the provincial level in early 2019. This move

does not refute the SVP's pro-Europeanism. Yet, it proves that the party is also willing to compromise on (some) Europe-related issues, in order to secure pragmatic policy solutions for South Tyrol in light of changing political circumstances in the host-state.

Compared to the continuing devolution from the host-state to South Tyrol, the SVP's ambitions of rapprochement with the kin-state were only moderately successful. Cross-border interactions with Austria indeed became easier following the implementation of Schengen and the introduction of the Euro. However, the SVP's envisaged cross-border project of a "European Region of Tyrol" could barely add any tangible results to these innovations. Newly enforced provisions, like the creation of a European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) under EU law in 2011, have had rather limited impacts on most citizens' lives.⁸⁷ In fact, some of the most controversial issues, like the management of transit traffic in the Alpine border region, still remain unresolved between the different parts of Tyrol.⁸⁸ Tellingly, all SVP interviewees admitted that their initial enthusiasm for a borderless "Europe of the Regions" had been exaggerated and that they had reverted to more pragmatic positions. One interviewee even admitted that "the Europe of the Regions is an idea that hasn't moved on."⁸⁹

In addition to the faltering implementation of the "European Region," state-wide policies in the kin-state have complicated rapprochement between South Tyrol and Austria in the crisis-prone period. The SVP, for instance, vehemently rejected the Austrian government's intention to introduce border controls with Italy during the 2015/16 "refugee crisis." Similarly, leading SVP members have been critical of the far-right Freedom Party's plans to give Austrian passports to South Tyroleans. South Tyrol's First Minister, Arno Kompatscher, has emphasized that such a policy can only be implemented "in a European spirit," in order to prevent the resurgence of revanchism.⁹⁰

The spill-back of some European policies in the kin-state, and the limited policy output of the

“European Region of Tyrol” notwithstanding, the SVP still emphasizes that the “European Region of Tyrol-South Tyrol-Trentino allows for the integration of the historic Tyrol and for a rapprochement of people across borders.”⁹¹ One SVP politician explained his party’s insistence on the concept with a degree of path dependence (“the European Region is part of a European development that began with the Austria’s EU accession”), and with the need to counter demands for secession and irredentism (“[All the parties] want maximum sovereignty [for South Tyrol...] But the European Region is better than the big visions promoted by others [...] This is our way to react to calls for self-determination”).⁹²

In light of the crisis-proneness of European integration, the SVP recognizes the limits for functional cooperation with the kin-state. Yet party competition incentivizes the SVP to adhere to the rhetoric of the “European Region of Tyrol.” The SVP’s ambitions to link emancipation from the host-state to European integration have prevailed, and even intensified in recent years. However, the party has also been prepared to take less principled positions on European integration in order to maintain a stable working relationship with the host-state government.

COMPARISON & CONCLUSION

This article starts from the assumption that kin-minority parties change their territorial positions in response to European integration. The main hypothesis is that European integration constrains ethnic claims for territorial restructuring, particularly irredentism. Instead, it provides incentives for the pursuit of territorial autonomy within the host-state, and for functional cooperation with the kin-states. These propositions are tested by exploring the trajectories of the SDLP and the SVP over three distinct phases of European integration.

In both cases, interstate integration has not led to a revocation of kin-minority parties’ irredentist demands. Rather, the increasingly cooperative relationship between states provided

incentives for kin-minority parties to utilize interstate cooperation to pursue their territorial goals. For the SDLP, the host-state's and the kin-state's joint EU membership provided a fruitful context in which conflict resolution through interstate cooperation could be promoted. This approach became the party's policy priority over the phase of interstate integration and was directly supported by EU institutions. Yet irredentism remained the SDLP's long-term aspiration. The SVP crucially relied on the negotiations between the host-state and the kin-state to obtain its foremost territorial goal, autonomy for South Tyrol. European integration did not influence these negotiations directly. However, the SVP acknowledged potential benefits of European integration for national minorities as early as 1972. This incipient Europeanization contributed to the partial mitigation of the SVP's ethnolinguistic ideology.

The intensification of European integration in the late 1980s and 1990s led kin-minority parties to endorse neofunctionalist interpretations of minority-state relations. The SDLP hoped that cooperation across the communities in Northern Ireland, and across the jurisdictions on the islands of Ireland and Great Britain would gradually expand and bring about reconciliation. Large parts of these positions materialized in the structure of the GFA. Yet the SDLP's desired outcome of neofunctional integration fluctuated between "post-nationalism" and irredentism. This ambiguity made the party vulnerable to more assertive electoral challengers once the GFA had been put in place. The SVP aspired that the EC accession of its kin-state would provide opportunities for closer cross-border cooperation, particularly at the regional level. The concept of the largely functionally inspired "European Region of Tyrol" allowed the SVP to abandon its ethnolinguistic exclusivism. The SVP's main focus remained, however, on the expansion of South Tyrol's autonomy within the host-state. This outlook, combined with past success in negotiating the province's autonomy, helped the SVP remain a competitive electoral force in spite of intensifying party competition.

The crisis-proneness of European integration has not led kin-minority parties to revisit key territorial positions. Kin-minority parties' commitment to pursue territorial goals through functionally inspired territorial restructuring has even intensified in some respects. However, on some occasions, kin-minority parties admit the limited practicability of their Europeanized positions. The SDLP acknowledges that its neofunctionalist expectations regarding the GFA were exaggerated. Yet the party is eager to safeguard the Agreement against the negative implications of spill-backs in the integration process, and even insists on using the GFA's cross-border institutions to manage the effects of Brexit. UK-internal institutional deadlock, and the SDLP's poor electoral performance diminish the relevance of these positions. The SVP's primary goal remains further emancipation from the host-state. The party uses its pro-European positions to demarcate itself from increasingly Eurosceptic host-state authorities. However, the SVP has also been prepared to take more pragmatic positions on European integration to maintain a stable working relationship with the host-state, and to possibly obtain further territorial concessions from it. By the same token, the party continues to uphold the idea of a "European Region of Tyrol" as an alternative to competing secessionist concepts. At the same time, it downscopes its own expectations about regional cross-border cooperation.

In short, Europeanization has led to a partial convergence of kin-minority parties' territorial positions around functionally driven minority – state relations. While the SDLP promotes a functionalist reconfiguration of a variety of relationships on the islands of Ireland and Great Britain, the SVP puts its foremost emphasis on redefining minority-host-state relations. Unlike other regionalist or minority nationalist parties, the SDLP and the SVP have preserved their Europeanized territorial position, even against the backdrop of stasis or spill-backs in the integration process. This suggests that kin-minority parties' simultaneous pursuit of rapprochement with the kin-state, and emancipation from the host-state yields a distinctive trajectory of party Europeanization. This finding warrants further research on the

Europeanization of party politics in border regions, and, more generally, on the relationship between functional interdependences and ethnoterritorial identities.

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Figure 1: *The Three Phases of Kin-minority Europeanization (own compilation)*

